REBIRTH OF THE VISION
Galatians 5:1, 13-15
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"When there is no vision, the people perish." Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

Were you watching television several weeks ago when Omnibus, that spectre from our simpler past, returned? Near the end, actress Meryl Streep recited the words to "America the Beautiful", while a group of persons translated into sign language, in a marvelously expressive choreography for the hearing impaired. The grace of the sign language and the simple, clear recitation of the words added up to a powerful and, for me, poignant experience. I had not listened to them carefully for a long time, if ever.

O beautiful for spacious skies, For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties Above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood From sea to shining sea!
O beautiful for pilgrim feet, Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat Across the wilderness!
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!
O beautiful for glorious tale Of liberating strife,
When valiantly for man's avail Men lavished precious life!
America! America! May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness And every gain divine!
O beautiful for patriot dream That sees, beyond the years,
Thine alabaster cities gleam, Undimmed by human tears!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood From sea to shining sea!

What a vision! Katharine Bates wrote those words in 1903, several decades after the Civil War, at a time of peace and optimism, when it seemed that the vision was within reach. America had survived the worst that could occur. "Self-control, liberty in law, brotherhood, nobleness - from sea to shining sea". It was really going to happen.

Part of the poignancy I experienced, which we all feel when we hear the words of that hymn, is born of the nearly universal sense that we have lost something recently. In two decades we have lost something as vital to our nation as a heart is to our own physiology; namely, our vision; our enobling, uplifting, inspiring dream. Somehow, in the year of our Lord 1980 alabaster cities, fruited plains, and gold refined by God himself sound hollow, empty, childish, almost silly. In the year of our Lord, 1980, it's embarassing to invoke ideas like brotherhood, sisterhood, liberty and justice for all, in any way but metaphor or memory.

The newspapers remind us that the current malaise is almost overwhelmingly negative. We are not only unhappy with the choice we must make in November, we seem to believe that it won't make any difference anyway. We seem to be convinced that things are out of control in our society and we appear willing to believe the worst anybody can say about us. Our Labor Unions are the most corrupt, our corporations totally dishonest, our Government totally inept, etc., etc., ad nauseum. The Vision...is dead.

Robert Bellah, University of California Sociologist, identifies the erosion in these terms: "It takes the form of a decline in belief in all forms of obligation: to one's occupation, one's family, one's country. A tendency to rank personal gratification above obligation to others correlates with a deepening cynicism about the established social, economic and political institutions of society. A sense that the institutions are unjust and serve the interests of the few at the expense of the many, is used to

justify the inapplicability of moral obligations to one's self." (The Broken Covenant, preface, p.X).

Bellah, I believe, is exactly right. The morality of war is only one part of the issue in the reinstatement of registration for Selective Service. The fundamental issue is obligation to one's nation, community, family and, as far as I know, the only group raising that issue is the Southern Presbyterian Church which urged the President to conscript everyone for a period of national service - not exactly military, but service to the nation. We're not in the mood for that: we're not in the mood to pay taxes for better education or to support a welfare system so that a decent level of life is available to all, or voluntarily to clean up the environment, or restrict the percent of increase in next year's contract..."Hell no, we won't go" is only one variation in a new National theme which says, "I'm obligated to myself, to me...period." The cynicism about the institutions is a product of that, Bellah suggests and, again, I believe he is correct. Business people know very well that the Unions are corrupt and selfish. Laborers, on the other hand, know who owns the place and for whom tax loopholes exist. They know it every time they read about a millionaire paying no taxes. Investors know that the system favors the poor. The poor know that the rich have the power and make the system work to their benefit. The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility sometimes sounds incapable of trusting any business more sophisticated than the corner grocer. And Fortune magazine responds in kind by labeling any church person who raises issues of morality in the area of sales policy or environmental sensitivity as anti-business. Suddenly, according to Fortune, to care publicly about the environment is to be a Marxist. The vision is dead - and so - along with it, is the courage and willingness and the will to trust.

The retiring Moderator of our General Assembly, Howard Rice, in his final sermon underlined the theological dimension to the dynamic. "Liberals," Rice observed, "have forgotten the vision of the future and have become mere social critics. Conservatives have lost the ability to talk prophetically about the present."

Princeton Seminary President James McCord, in an address I heard several years ago, took the Church to task at the same point. "We have forgotten how to dream," he said. "We have lost the ability to talk about the future. We have simply abandoned the future to the kooks."

The best selling religious author and book in the past decade? Hans Kung, On Being A Christian? Charles Colson, Born Again? Billy Graham? Wrong. The best seller is "The Late Great Planet Earth" by Hal Lindsey, which contains not one single word of recognizable, legitimate Biblical scholarship. Its point is, simply, that the Bible predicts what is now happening in the Near East - a device used by assorted seers for 2,000 years - and the world is about to come to an end.

It is the hottest religious idea on the market today. Just as rank pessimism characterizes our political views, so theologically, everybody seems to want to believe that we're about to run out of time and options on this earth and for some that's good news but for most, very bad news. From the fringes of the Pentecostal movement, to the Jesus people, to the Hari Krishnas and the unending parade of mystic Maharajas from the East, the one consistent motif is that the end is coming.

What I'm learning both by observation and experience is that the Bible is, as usual, correct. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" one way or another. When you throw your dream on the scrap heap, you're through, sooner or later. You either retreat into the infinite reaches of your own selfishness or you sit around pining for the end of the world, or both.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." May I suggest that the ancient observation is relevant and timely? May I suggest that the only antidote to the despair and frustration you and I are experiencing at the moment is to reclaim the vision and recommit to it?

Some suggest that the vision is corrupt - that we aren't what we say we are. But there has always been a gap between the vision and the reality of America. Bellah notes that as soon as we made the covenant we broke it. We took the land from the people who owned it, fought them, killed them, drove them into pathetic exile and systematically addicted them to a debilitating, deadly dependence. We proclaimed the unalienability of human rights and built one half of our economy on slavery. There has always been a gap between the vision and the reality. The difference between this nation and totalitarian systems is that we acknowledge the gap. Neither Fascism nor Communism is capable of that. We acknowledge and feel guilt - if not enough, sufficient enough to push us along paths of remedy. We did pass a Civil Rights Act under the power of our vision and we did marshal the resources of the nation and we are willing to keep trying to reconcile that ancient and awful wrong. And we did, last week, award the heirs of those native persons from whom we took this country, a settlement which doesn't erase the evil but demonstrates our awareness of the gap.

There has always been a gap between the vision of our strength and power and the reality of its appropriate exercise in the world. That's our problem today. We simply have enough conscience left, thank God, to find the thought of nuclear war repugnant. That is not weakness, unless the Hitlers of this world really are its moral arbiters. A Time Magazine essay observed: "The real calculus of American strength is not expressed primarily in terms of a willingness to fight or in numbers of missiles and warheads. It is not expressed in how tough Americans can be with the Soviets, or anybody else abroad. It is expressed precisely in how tough Americans are willing to be on themselves." (Time, June 4, 1979).

May I suggest, modestly and respectfully, that instead of the wastefulness of despair it is time now for us to rebirth the vision? And may I suggest that while the greatest atrocities in history have occurred when people were convinced that God's will was simply the national will carried out, Christian people have a major stake in the future of this particular Republic? It is the grossest form of blasphemy to suggest that God likes Americans better than other people, or Republicans better than Democrats. But it is irresponsible and unbiblical to suggest that God does not care about the way His privileged children order and live their common life.

It is time to reclaim the vision, beneath these several, essential Christian assertions...

1. ...There is only one King, one Sovereign, one Lord. Human allegiance is given ultimately only once, to the Creator God himself. If it is given without reservation, without question, to any ruler, any state, any ideology, and political system, it becomes idolatry which is, in the Bible, the fundamental sin. The vision of America is most precious precisely because it does not expect an Obeisance reserved for God alone. Christian people embrace and rejoice in a vision of religious liberty which is never separate from political liberty.

2. ...All nations exist by God's grace. Even the ones we don't like. Even the ones we have a hard time imagining God liking. He really is sovereign,

that is to say. Without judging others, we conclude that He really has shed His grace on this nation. We may not be His newly elected Israel, but we are a very privileged part of His family - and that privilege and inherited greatness carry a long list of responsibilities with them. We are, in fact, our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

3. ...We, and all people, were created to be free. St. Paul understood the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be a Magna Charta of human freedom. That got him in a lot of trouble and it has been embroiling Christians in controversy and worse ever since. There is an impetus in human affairs, religious, political, economic, to take authority away from people and lodge it in their institutions. The result is less freedom. Christian people are opposed to that impetus, wherever they find it - in Rome, in Germany in the 30's - today in Taiwan, Korea, Russia, Iran.

4. ...Because of what we believe about the Creator God, through his self disclosure in Jesus Christ, we conclude that the highest morality and therefore the life to which our Creator calls us, is love; and that love is not at all avoiding evil so much as it is a voluntary sense of obligation to others. Our Lord loved by dying. His cross is our banner and at our best we act as if we really believed what He said about laying down our lives - and finding life by losing it - and taking up a cross and following Him.

5. ...Finally, and most incredibly of all, we believe God loves the world enough to ask a son to die on its behalf. God does not despise this world. He doesn't want us to despise it. He isn't neutral at all about the world and He doesn't want us withdrawing from it into some private spirituality that concentrates on the hereafter at the expense of life here and now. God, the Creator, is optimistic about the world and its future. He wants people who know about Him and His love and His will to be living thoroughly, joyfully and hopefully in that same world.

It was the terrible trauma of the Civil War that inspired Walt Whitman to write about America in a way that is haunting and yet hopeful. Listen to his words.....

> "America is really the great test or trial for all the problems and promises and speculations of humanity and of the past and present...We sail a dangerous sea of seething currents...It seems as if the Almighty had spread before this nation charts of imperial destinies, dazzling as the sun, yet with many a deep difficulty...If you would have greatness, know that you must conquer it through ages, centuries - must pay for it with proportionate price."

"Where there is no vision, the people perish," an ancient philosopher observed. Where there is vision, the people live. And where a vision is reborn, people are doing that which is necessary to preserve and protect and hand to their children this remarkable experiment, this "alabaster city, beyond the years, undimmed by tears... God shed His grace on thee."

Amen.